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Kentucky's challenge: Maintain affordability

While pursuing an ambitious higher education agenda for our universities

A report recently issued by Crit Luallen, Auditor of Public Accounts, concludes that rising tuition is affecting Kentucky's ability to meet the 2020 postsecondary education goals established by the General Assembly in 1997.

Coming from one of the architects of the reform legislation, the auditor's report is an important reminder of both the necessity of continuing to push toward our 2020 goals, and of doing so in a manner that is affordable to both the public and to the students.

There is no question that if postsecondary education becomes unaffordable we will not meet the goals set by Kentucky's landmark postsecondary and adult education legislation. Those goals focused on moving Kentucky to at least national averages in terms of standard of living and quality of life. To fall

short, or to say we can't do it, is to permanently consign us to below-average status.

Two primary factors cause institutions to increase tuition: the level of state funding provided at any given point in time, and the increasing costs of salaries and benefits, utilities, and other expenditures essential to delivering quality programs and services. While postsecondary education must remain affordable, it must also have sufficient revenues to meet the educational needs of Kentuckians. Therein lies the challenge - maintaining affordability while pursuing an ambitious agenda.

Kentucky has taken steps in recent years to curb college costs, including new controls on tuition increases; linking tuition increases more closely to levels of state funding and financial aid; forging new institutional com-

mitments to help needy students; beginning forgivable loan programs for teachers and health-care professionals; and developing special scholarship programs for transfer students and part-time working adults.

More must be done, but the imperative of providing quality programs and services at an affordable cost is being addressed.

If we are to be successful in transforming Kentucky's economy, we must think and act differently. We must strive not only to raise the educational levels of our citizens, but also to make Kentucky attractive to outsiders who will bring opportunities for growth with them. To meet these needs, we must engage all components of the educational system, not just postsecondary education, and we must develop stronger partnerships with business and industry.

We have made substantial progress since the passage of the postsecondary education reform legislation in 1997, and are now recognized as a model for other states to emulate. While the rate of enrollment increases has shown some signs of flattening in recent years, more Kentuckians are attending college than ever before, and many more are graduating prepared for life and work.

It is also worth noting that while we are drawing a larger number of students from outside the state to Kentucky's colleges and universities, more of these students are staying in the state after graduation, raising families, and contributing to our economies and our communities. If Kentucky is to achieve economic parity with the rest of the nation, it must not only increase the education of its citizens but also attract people from other states to

live and work here.

But the pace of change must intensify. What will it take going forward? A strong, affordable postsecondary system depends on these things at a minimum:

- > An adequate and sustained financial commitment from our elected leaders;

- > An unrelenting focus on the state's public agenda for postsecondary and adult education, which challenges us to reach the national average in educational attainment by 2020;

- > A strong Council on Postsecondary Education leading efforts to keep the good of the Commonwealth and its citizens the first priority;

- > An understanding of the challenges posed by the global economy and technological change, and the requirements both place on the educational system; and

- > A recognition that the achievement of reform goals is a shared responsibility among state policymakers, our colleges and universities, and the K-12 education system.

The reform legislation began a revolution in the way in which we view our postsecondary and adult education system. In a remark by John Adams to a friend some years after the American Revolution he noted, "...The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people...This radical change in the principles, opinions and affections of the people was the real American Revolution."

So it was then, so it must be now: a strong public will and a motivated attitude will determine our ultimate success.

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